

THE MANDATORY PROXY

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For responsibility is the extreme of subissement: it is that for which I must answer when I am without any answer and without any self save a borrowed, a simulated self, or the “stand-in” for identity: the mandatory proxy.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

On the surface, Jean-Luc Godard's fourth film, *Vivre sa Vie* (1962), does not appear to be an act of autobiographical expression. It stands in stark contrast to François Truffaut's classic *Les quatre cents coups* (1959), for example, in which the lead character, Antoine, is famously modeled on Truffaut's own life. To the viewer ignorant of the real life context of Godard's film—in particular, the crucial knowledge that the lead actress, Anna Karina, was his wife at the time—*Vivre sa Vie* seems to be exclusively an experimental fiction, void of all personal elements. Armed with this knowledge, however, and after examining the various intertextual clues that Godard drops throughout the film, it gradually emerges that the film is aimed at rethinking, rather than reproducing, the presuppositions of the autobiographical act.

That Godard manages to undertake such a critique using a film in which he neither portrays the events of his own life nor appears directly as an actor (except to provide a single voice-over) is a testament both to his mastery and his theme. Karina is the only visible link to Godard's reality, although she is not standing in for Godard in the same sense that Jean-Pierre Léaud does for Truffaut. Her appearance is nonetheless crucial to Godard's project because it allows him to blur the boundaries between life and art, between the real world and the world of performance. The film's concerns thus go beyond Shun-liang Chao's location of the film as an early postmodern piece, instead drawing much of its inspiration from the literature of the nineteenth century.

While a few of these outside references, such as Godard's nods towards Poe and Dumas, have been well noted by critics, there are many more that have received little or no attention. What is intriguing about these allusions

is that they draw, to a large extent, from the realist or naturalist traditions. Far from following the postmodern trend of rejecting these texts as expressions of a naive desire to “paint the world” (the famous slogan of the early realists), Godard sees in these writers an important parallel to his own project in this film. As he himself puts it in one interview: “*Vivre sa Vie* is a realistic film, and at the same time extremely unrealistic” (Mussman 84). *Vivre sa Vie* employs realist techniques, in other words, as a self-reflexive tool in order to question the reality of its own construction.

Godard also imports ideas from the theater, from Bertolt Brecht and Luigi Pirandello (in place of *Vivre sa Vie*, Godard originally wanted to bring Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* [1922] to the screen, but could not afford the rights). Brecht’s influence, claims Barry Boys, can be seen already at work in Godard’s second feature, *Le Petit Soldat* (1960), which unfolds as “an object-lesson in overcoming Brecht’s ‘Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth’” (23). The result is perhaps the most quoted line about realism in modern cinema, a statement that possesses deep resonance when looking forward to *Vivre sa Vie*. “To photograph a face is to photograph the soul behind it,” says Bruno in *Le Petit Soldat*: “Photography is truth. And the cinema is the truth twenty-four times a second.”

But *Vivre sa Vie* also contains an implicit critique of the emerging cinematic theories of Godard’s fellow *Nouvelle Vague* director Truffaut. Truffaut formulated what would later become known by the popular rubric of auteur theory, a critical approach that crystallized the collective work of filmmaking around the individual, creative force of the director. Truffaut’s theories gave a modernist twist to the apparently objective realism of the camera. What you, as the viewer, see is what the director wants or allows you to see, and it is in this sense that the director becomes an “author,” a creator engaged in the production of his or her artistic vision. Cinema thus gains a new sense of autobiographical expression, each film becoming the personal (if sometimes indirect) reflection of the life and milieu of the director.

ONE OR TWO THINGS I KNOW ARE MINE

Rather than rejecting outright either the realist or auteur approaches to cinema in *Vivre sa Vie*, Godard appropriates and undermines them through a process of calculated subversion. The first hint is given in the title of the film, although its full nuance tends to be lost when translated into English. “*Vivre sa Vie*” is usually rendered as either “My Life to Live,” or less frequently, as “Her Life to Live.” What especially changes in this transition from French to English is the addition of the possessive pronoun. “*Vivre*” is an infinitive

in French, a verb form that possesses neither subject nor tense. In this form, therefore, “vivre,” to live, expresses the highest degree of detachment and impersonality available in the French language. Yet Godard’s translators are not definitively “wrong” in translating the title in this way, for “vivre sa vie” can indeed contain an *implied* sense of possession. It is this ambiguity that Godard exploits in both the title and this film as a whole: what I call “mine,” what is most personal to me, is also ultimately unknown, and therefore detached and impersonal at the ontological level.

The second clue is provided by the casting of Anna Karina. This choice plays with both reality and the notion of the “auteur,” insofar as the informed viewer is expected to know and account for the fact that Karina is Godard’s wife. Susan Sontag criticizes Godard for this strategy, arguing that the film’s conclusion is weakened by “the fact that Godard is clearly making a reference outside the film” (207). But what Sontag calls “one lapse” in an otherwise “perfect film” is actually the culminating aspect of a technique that Godard uses throughout *Vivre sa Vie*. As with the film’s title, Godard’s protagonist is a paradoxical mixture of detachment and intimacy. The intimacy the viewer feels for Nana comes from a number of sources: the knowledge that she is Godard’s wife gives her a certain aura, especially insofar as it is impossible to escape the transgressive sense that, at some level, we are watching a veiled allegory of their marriage; the details that are given about her private life, shameful events that one would not normally reveal to a stranger; and Godard’s choice of shots, particularly his use of extreme close-ups, which provides a forceful (and yet undoubtedly artificial) sense of emotional proximity.

The viewer is nonetheless also detached from Karina’s character—a distance that, paradoxically, seems to grow the more we know about her. In the opening scene in the café, Godard famously portrays Nana and Paul from behind, like in a painting by René Magritte, so that the viewer can catch only small glimpses of their faces in the mirrors attached to the walls. This visually alienating effect is counterbalanced, however, by the noise in the rest of the café, which threatens to drown out the dialogue at various points. In effect, the viewer is transformed into an eavesdropper, straining to hear the words being exchanged by the former lovers, participating in their intimacy and yet also clearly uninvited. Godard self-consciously goes against the history of film, in which, Sontag argues, “image and word have worked in tandem” (200). In a film where the word dominates, the viewer feels that an intrusion is taking place, that the story is being interrupted by the dialogue. Yet this apparent disjunction only reflects further the ambivalence at the heart of all signification. Communication, whether by word or image, is characterized by its ability to draw people together, to create a sense of intimacy



Eavesdropping on life: the mirroring in the opening shots of *Vivre sa Vie* of Nana/Anna Karina and Paul/André Labarthe introduces a recurring interplay between absolute familiarity and estrangement.

that is simultaneously torn away by the inability to penetrate beyond its glistening, opaque surface.

This uncertain interplay between word and image is reflected further in the protagonist's name. Nana is the familiar or affectionate form of Anna, the actress's real name, so that Karina is playing her namesake, if not "herself." This choice of name, however, also has a number of important echoes. No critic has yet discussed the fact that the name of Godard's heroine is an allusion to Émile Zola's *Nana* (1880).¹ The narrative resonance between Godard's film and Zola's novel is unmistakable, with each text structured around a beautiful heroine who, while aspiring to be an actress, is drawn into the world of prostitution. Zola is also important as a key inheritor of the realist tradition that characterized French letters in the first half of the nineteenth century. Along with Gustave Flaubert, Zola reformed the realist platform into the school of naturalism, which came to dominate French letters in the

latter part of nineteenth century. The idea behind naturalism was that it would combine the realist style with a scientific approach to human behavior. By borrowing the dispassionate outlook of the scientific mind, naturalism would, in a sense, bring its readers a grittier, less compromised view of everyday life. Godard frequently imports this style into *Vivre sa Vie*, fusing realist techniques into the film's fictional narrative to such an extent that Adrian Danks calls the film "a 'documentary' of Nana's image (and subsequently the image of Godard's then wife, Karina)."

Godard does not adopt these techniques simply as a matter of style, however. The film's many allusions are carefully chosen both for their surface value and for the self-reflexive way in which they challenge their own artistic assumptions. Zola fully realizes, for example, that his portrayal of the lowlife world of prostitution in *Nana* is at odds with the highbrow assumptions by which his literature operates. The first chapter of the novel, for instance, details Nana's stage debut in a fictional operetta titled *The Blonde Venus*. As the drama unfolds, the musical's pretentious, high art references to the classical world are subverted by the actors' bawdy performance:

This carnival of the gods, this dragging of Olympus in the mud, this mockery of a whole religion, a whole world of poetry, struck the audience as rich entertainment. A fever of irreverence took hold of the literary first-nighters: legend was being trampled underfoot, the ancient images were being shattered. Jupiter looked a fool, and Mars was too funny for words. Royalty had been turned into a farce and the Army into a joke. (37–38)

The novel thus contains a self-conscious critique of society's fascination with trawling through its own abject muck, pointing the finger firmly at the sordid values of Zola's contemporary milieu. Nonetheless, in making this critique, Zola is also aware that his own text is exploiting this fascination even as it denounces it. It is perhaps on this basis that Godard generally excludes sexual images from *Vivre sa Vie*, making the reality of Nana's prostitution extend beyond eroticism into the more profound reaches of her being. Devoid of visible actions, prostitution acts purely as a signifier of the paradoxical interplay between intimacy and alienation.

THE CINEMA AND ITS DOUBLE

It is through this play of mirrors, this intertwining of attraction and repulsion, and this alienation in the midst of the familiar, that Godard sets up one of the central points of critique in *Vivre sa Vie*. He seems to understand that one of the main consequences of literary realism's attempt to "paint the world" was

the realization that the portraits it created inevitably contained a critique of their subject, intentional or otherwise. No matter how faithful to the original the artist attempted to be, the reflection always contained an element of interpretation, an inherent bias. Thus realism, while ostensibly trying to create an “objective” portrayal, could not help but absorb “subjective” values into its construction. One result of this realization was the rise of the *Doppelgänger*, or double, in which there appeared a character that, to all appearances, was a perfect replica of the main protagonist. While this device was often used in supernatural or Gothic settings, such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “William Wilson” (1839) or Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Double* (1846), it could also function believably within a realistic setting—for example, in Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). It is this critical potential of the act of doubling that Godard seeks to tap in *Vivre sa Vie*.

This technique can already be seen in the string of doubles created by the protagonist’s name. Zola’s creation provides the rough template for Godard’s character, who in turn is played by Anna (Nana) Karina. Connected by a common first name and outwardly similar destinies (if we accept that Karina is, in a metaphorical sense, playing the whore to Godard’s pimp), each version of Nana/Anna is both familiar and alien at the same time. This act of doubling occurs not only in this external sense, but also at the level of consciousness. Thus, in section 11, when the philosopher Brice Parain (playing a fictional character? himself? the line is again unclear, so that Parain himself has a kind of “double” role) gives an exposition on the nature of language, he cites Alexandre Dumas’s character Porthos as a key example. Always a man of action, Porthos dies from the dynamite charge he had set up. His death is not caused by a physical inability to run, but by the sudden realization that his physical movements are performed in a purely unconscious manner. This thought divides Porthos in two, a moment of internal alienation that locks up his feet, thus catching him in the blast that causes his death. Far from reproducing reality, then, Godard uses the apparent objectivity of the camera as a way to create cinematic “doubles,” deliberately blurring the lines between reality and fiction, internal and external, personal and impersonal.

This strategy is reinforced by two other important references, the first being to Poe’s short story “The Oval Portrait” (1842), which is read aloud in section 12 of the film. Poe’s tale is an elegant parody of realism, in which an aristocrat, through a self-consciously Gothic turn of events, seeks shelter with his valet in an abandoned castle. There he discovers an oval portrait, spellbinding in its “absolute *life-likeness* of expression,” as well as a diary that records the history of its composition (291). Poe’s story is a clever caricature of realist aesthetics, in which the artist recounts how his ability to capture life

in art leads to the death of his wife. This reference cuts deeply when the viewer realizes that Godard is offering Poe's story as a "double" of his own narrative: the artist who sucks the life out of his ailing wife in "The Oval Portrait" is placed in direct juxtaposition to Godard (who dubs his own voice over the actor's reading) and Karina, also artist and wife, ostensibly attempting to capture "Life itself" (292).

The second reference that confirms this strategy of "doubling" is provided by Godard's visual citations, in section 3 of the film, of Carl Dreyer's classic silent film *Jeanne d'Arc* (1928). The juxtaposition between Maria Falconetti, who plays Jeanne, and Anna Karina is one of the most memorable aspects of *Vivre sa Vie*. Together they form an artistic contrast between saint and whore, as well as history (Dreyer drew from the court documents as the source for Jeanne's cinematic trial) and fiction (Zola, Poe, Dumas). Just as important as Dreyer's film, however, is the brief appearance of Antonin Artaud, who plays one of Jeanne's ecclesiastical accusers. While Brecht is obviously a key dramatic influence on Godard, so too is Artaud, who complains in *The Theater and its Double* (1938) that the dramatic arts have lost their power in the modern era. The villain here is what Artaud calls "psychological" theater, in which language has become the primary generator of emotion.

Citing Shakespeare as a key shift in this direction, Artaud argues against the modern reliance on words over actions, and the concurrent insistence of the rational mind over instincts, dramatic characteristics that are absent from the more ancient forms of theater still active amongst, for example, the Balinese. To remedy this situation, the function of speech within drama has to be rethought. "It is not a matter of suppressing speech in the theater," Artaud writes,

but of changing its role, and especially of reducing its position, of considering it as something else than a means of conducting human characters to their external ends, since the theater is concerned only with the way feelings and passions conflict with one another, and man with man, in life. (72)

This changing role had been forced upon early cinema through its technical inability to align sound with image. The result, at least in the case of *Jeanne d'Arc*, is the kind of authenticity of action over words that Artaud champions throughout *The Theater and its Double*. Even the suffering the viewer sees on the face of Maria Falconetti is real, for Dreyer famously bullied the actress in order to extract this painful, believable performance from her. As with Karina, the extent to which Falconetti is "acting" is blurred by the drama: in the cinema, she becomes her own double.

GIVE YOURSELF TO YOURSELF

The influence of Pirandello on Godard is visible in this ambiguous reversal of fiction and reality. In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, for example, a realistic stage is populated by a group of actors in the midst of a rehearsal, who are interrupted in this activity by a family of fictional Characters. Pirandello's scenario results in a paradoxical set of dramatic postures, the Characters insisting upon their tragic authenticity while the actors, their rehearsal temporarily suspended, must pretend not to act (except, in a further twist, when they act out the drama of the Characters in Pirandello's play within a play). Karina, argues Jean Collet, is placed in much the same position throughout *Vivre sa Vie*:

Vivre sa Vie is not a film about "prostitution," as the advocates of sweeping generalizations would have it. Nor is it even a film about a prostitute; it's a film about Anna Karina trying to play a prostitute. Godard's use of distance is clearly the reverse of its role in Brecht: here prostitution is the thing removed. . . . Our attention and our tenderness are directed to the person of Nana in the full measure to which she plays at prostitution, and to which she gives of herself to herself, having attained the sovereign liberty of the actress. (47–48)

Godard demonstrates that within the frame of the camera (or in Pirandello's case, the stage) it is impossible not to act. Even to be "natural" or "realistic"—indeed, even to eschew acting altogether, like Parain—is rendered impossible by the gaze of art. The camera "chooses" its subjects; it mechanically reframes and interprets their words and actions with or without their consent. Objectified by the camera, the authenticity of any subject is repeatedly called into question. Thus the viewer is forced to ask constantly whether Nana's actions are motivated from her own instincts and desires, or whether they are the self-conscious moves of a talented actress in the process of seducing and entertaining her audience. The refusal to perform, the posture of absolute sincerity, becomes simply another type of performance when seen through Pirandello's artistic lens. These questions are generated not only by how Godard composes the film, but also by the philosophical concerns that surface repeatedly in the dialogue.

Apart from Parain's soliloquy, the most important of these metaphysical discussions occurs in section 6, in which Nana declares to Yvette: "I am responsible. I turn my head, I am responsible. I lift my hand, I am responsible." For Sontag, this affirmation is a culminating moment in Nana's character. Having thrown off the burdens of her old life, Sontag argues, Nana has

discovered freedom: “Nana knows herself to be free, Godard tells us. But that freedom has no psychological interior. Freedom is not an inner, psychological something—but more like physical grace. It is being *what, who* one is. . . . Being free means being responsible” (205). The common error that Sontag commits here is in taking Nana’s comments at their face value. Nana’s affirmation of responsibility, like the Characters who insist upon their reality in Pirandello’s play, must be evaluated through the artistic framework that brings her into being.

The source of Nana’s worldview is not difficult to trace, as she repeatedly borrows terms and concepts from the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, much in vogue at this time in France. In Sartre’s most famous work, *L’Être et le Néant* (1943), he outlines his concept of “*mauvaise foi*” or “bad faith,” a mode of thought in which the subject sacrifices true desire to act according to how things “ought” to be. Such faith is “bad” insofar as the subject is not really fooled by this act of repression, which in turn leads to unhappiness. Sartre releases humanity from its duty to a non-existent God, arguing that with the disappearance of the divine watchdog humanity is now free to pursue its own ends. Sartre’s freedom comes with a caveat, however: no longer responsible to God, the burden for moral action shifts onto each individual. Absolute freedom, for Sartre, also means an absolute sense of responsibility. It is within the context of such a philosophy that Sontag makes her assessment of Nana’s character: emerging from her bourgeois marriage to Paul, she abandons the bad faith that pins her to her domestic life to pursue the life she really wants.

But the implicit question that Godard puts to the viewer throughout the film is: wherein is the “I” constituted? What is it that I can call “mine,” or “myself”? The question is answered for us, in fact, by Nana, who quotes one of the most famous lines in French literature, from the poet Arthur Rimbaud: “*Je est un autre*”—“The ‘I’ is someone else.” The “I” is how I represent myself, how I speak my most intimate thoughts, and yet it is something that is given externally by the language imposed on me by culture. It is both absolutely familiar, and when closely inspected, absolutely alien in its historical contingency. When Nana says “I am responsible,” therefore, her words take on a double nuance, for she comes increasingly to the understanding that the “I” is also someone else.

Sontag is probably correct in supposing that Nana’s break with her family is an attempt to address her bad faith, as the opening conversation with Paul seems to indicate. Far from finding freedom through responsibility, however, Nana is plunged into a world beyond her control or understanding. The film moves in an inexorable pattern away from actions that Nana can

claim as her own, and introduces into her life a series of external exigencies—the robbery, for example—that serve to underscore her alienation. Through the intrusion of these events, Nana experiences the *impossibility* of being herself, of purging her bad faith through conscious action. Nana’s realization that her life is at the mercy of external circumstances, that even language betrays her by its very nature, leads her, in the “act” of death, to what Blanchot calls the “extreme of *subissement* [subjection, passivity]” (22). Here the vicious circle that connects bad faith and responsibility is broken by humanity’s only authentic act: death. As V. F. Perkins puts it: “the point is that it’s pointless,” a moment stripped of all intention and purpose (35).

But while the ending provides narrative and thematic closure to this cinematic exploration of Sartrean responsibility, Godard is well aware that this interrogation does not—indeed, cannot—come to a definitive end. He says: “The beauty of the cinema is that, whereas in the theatre if someone dies, at the end he must get up and one does not really believe it, in the cinema one can indicate that it is only an actor, but at the same time one can believe in his death because the cinema is real, it films reality. So, starting from theatre one can move into reality” (Mussman 86). The decision to use his own wife, to expose their intimacy, even at this subtextual level, to the Orphic gaze of art, is a strategy designed to unsettle the viewer. But this daring move only reinforces Godard’s demand that we, his audience, become honest with ourselves, that we recognize, like Nana, that the “I” is someone else, a term borrowed from outside to express our deepest intimacies, a mandatory proxy.

NOTES

1. Jean Renoir, one of Godard’s key cinematic influences, adapted Zola’s novel for the screen in 1926. Not only would Godard almost certainly have seen this early Renoir film, but Pierre Braunberger, who produced Renoir’s *Nana*, also produced *Vivre sa Vie*.

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